



# FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Principles and Practice | PRANEE LIAMPUTTONG



# Focus Group Methodology

## Principles and Practice

Pranee Liamputtong



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# **Focus Group Methodology**

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To my children:

Zoe Sanipreeya Rice and Emma Inturatana Rice

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Pranee Liamputtong** is a medical anthropologist and holds a position of Personal Chair in Public Health at the School of Public Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

Pranee has a particular interest in issues relating to cultural and social influences on childbearing, childrearing and women's reproductive and sexual health. She has undertaken many research projects with immigrant women in Australia and women in Southeast Asia. Pranee has published numerous books and a large number of papers in these areas. Her recent books in the health area include: *The journey of becoming a mother amongst women in northern Thailand* (Lexington Books, 2007); *Community, health and population* (Oxford University Press, 2008); and *Infant feeding practices: A cross-cultural perspective* (Springer, 2010). She is editing a series of books on HIV/AIDS for Springer including two upcoming books: *Motherhood and HIV/AIDS: A cross-cultural perspective*, and *Stigma, discrimination and HIV/AIDS: A cross-cultural perspective*.

Pranee is a qualitative researcher and has also published several methods books. Her most recent ones include: *Researching the vulnerable: A guide to sensitive research methods* (Sage, 2007); *Qualitative research methods*, 3rd edition (Oxford University Press, 2009); *Performing qualitative cross-cultural research* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); and *Research methods in health: Foundations for evidence-based practice* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

# PREFACE

Focus group methodology has been used for a long time in marketing research, but it is only in the last decade or so that it has started to gain popularity as a research method within the health and social sciences. Focus group interviews are now employed extensively. A review of online databases in social science in 1994 alone shows that over 100 papers utilising focus groups as a method appeared in refereed journals. A content analysis of the materials from Sociological Abstracts over the past decade indicates that more than 60 per cent of research employing focus groups was done in combination with other research methods. However, self-contained focus group research has gradually become more common in recent years.

In this book, I demonstrate that the focus group methodology is not new. It can be traced back to the year 1926 when Emory Bogardus described group interviews in social science research. The methodology was also used during the Second World War when Robert Merton employed the method to examine people's reactions to wartime propaganda and the effectiveness of training materials for the soldiers. In the same period, the methodology was introduced into marketing research. Since then, focus groups have been popular and used extensively in the applied social sciences. The methodology has started to gain popularity in research relating to different social groups and in cross-cultural and development research. The main argument for using this methodology in this context is the collective nature, which may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily, and which provides collective power to marginalised people. Hence, we have seen more articles dedicated to the use of focus groups in different social and cultural groups. Additionally, the Internet has become a site and source of data collection for many health and social science researchers. We have begun to witness more virtual focus groups in recent times. However, to my knowledge, there is not a single book that includes all of the issues mentioned above. In this volume, I propose to bridge the main gap in the literature.

This book includes discussions relating to the use of focus group methodology in the health and social sciences. I cover both theoretical and practical aspects of research using the focus group methodology. I also include detailed suggestions on how to adapt focus groups in diverse social and cultural settings and with different groups of people including vulnerable and marginalised populations and in cross-cultural research. The volume also includes a chapter on virtual focus groups, a new trend and innovative means of conducting focus groups in the health and social sciences. It is



essential that a book like this needs to provide discussions on how to manage and make sense of focus group data. These issues are also included in this book.

In each chapter, I integrate the following features: chapter objectives, chapter summaries, case examples, tutorial exercises and sources of further reading. Case examples are drawn from a wide selection of extended empirical studies in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and other English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries. I also use simple language that students and novice researchers are able to follow easily.

The book is aimed at students and interested researchers. It is particularly pertinent to postgraduate students who are carrying out research as part of their degrees, and who are interested in qualitative focus group methodology. The book is useful for researchers who wish to have a basic understanding of focus groups and need to adopt the methodology to suit the exigencies and circumstances of their research in different social and cultural settings. It can also be used as a textbook for both undergraduates and postgraduate in health sciences, medical sciences, social work, anthropology, sociology, cross-cultural and development studies since it contains simple research methodology for the students to follow and many case examples for illustrating the points.

In bringing this book to life, I owe my gratitude to many people. First, I thank Patrick Brindle, the Senior Acquisition Editor of Sage Publications in London, who believes in the virtue of this book and contracted me to write it. I thank him wholeheartedly. I wish to thank Rosemary Oakes, my dearest friend, who diligently read through, commented and edited my chapters before I submitted the book. She sacrificed much of her time to assist me with the final touches to this book. Rosemary's help is greatly appreciated. My thanks also go to several of my PhD students and colleagues including Dusanee Suwankhong for helping to check references, and Carolyn Weston, Danielle Couch and Helen Rawson who helped edit some chapters in this volume. I also want to express my thanks to David Hodge, Editorial Assistant of Sage, who not only worked with me on the book cover and production of the book, but also provided valuable feedback in the revision of the manuscript. I am grateful to the Development Editor, Stuart Mitchell, who provided valuable comments during the revision of the manuscript. Last, I thank my two daughters, Zoe Sanipreeya Rice and Emma Inturatana Rice, for putting up with my busy writing tasks.

Pranee Liamputtong  
Melbourne, March 2010

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# 1

## FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY: Introduction and History

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- An introduction to the focus group method
- The nature of focus group research
- Why the focus group is used in the health and social sciences
- Some criticisms about the focus group methodology
- History and development of focus group methodology
- Focus groups employed in market research and social research
- Virtual focus groups

### INTRODUCING THE FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Fezile: From rape you get AIDS.

Gugu: AIDS is rape.

Researcher: What's rape?

Nokulunga: When an older person calls you and does bad things to you.

Mlondi: A person grabs you when you are going to the shops and then does bad things to you.

Nontobeko: When he's doing bad things to you ... he puts his penis in you with force.

Focus group interview with young African children aged between seven and eight in a working class township context of KwaDabeka, Greater Durban, South Africa. (Bhana 2009: 596)

The quote above is taken from a study by Deevia Bhana (2009) in her research on how HIV and AIDS are interpreted and made meaningful by seven- and eight-year-old South African children. Her work shows that children's understandings of HIV and AIDS are constructed through many social processes and these processes frame their responses to the disease. This was carried out via focus group methodology. Fundamentally, as the quote above presents, the methodology offers the researchers 'a way of listening to people and learning from them' (Morgan 1998: 9).

Focus group methodology can be traced back to Emory Bogardus, who in 1926 described group interviews in his social psychological research to develop social distance scale (Wilkinson 2004). Over the past century or so, focus groups have been used for many purposes. In particular, the US military (see Merton 1987), Marxist revolutionaries (see Freire 1970/1993), literacy activists (see Kozol 1985) and feminist activists (see Madriz 2003) have adopted the focus group methodology as a means to allow them to advance their causes and concerns (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

Despite the fact that focus groups were initially developed as an academic research method, since the 1950s they have become more synonymous with market research (Munday 2006). However, the focus group methodology has now been regaining more popularity among academic researchers in the health and social sciences. Many of these researchers have been developing the methodology and steering it to suit their research needs.

The more recent popularity of focus groups in qualitative research in the health and social sciences is reflected in an increased number of papers and books. The reason that focus groups have become popular in recent years is partly because they are seen as the methodology which can provide results quickly (Kroll et al. 2007). It is perceived as a methodology which can generate complex information at low cost and with the minimum amount of time. It can also be used with a wide range of people and groups in different settings. However, this claim has been contested by several writers on focus groups (see Wilkinson 2004) and as readers will see in later chapters, the focus group methodology is not as cheap, easy and quick as has been claimed.

Focus groups have started to gain popularity in research relating to different social groups and in cross-cultural and development research. The main argument for using them in this context is their collective nature. This may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily and provide collective power to marginalised people. Hence, we have seen more articles dedicated to the use of focus groups in different social and cultural groups. However, there is not a single book that includes such topics. This is the main gap in the literature that I propose to fill with this volume.

According to David Morgan (2002), a prominent focus group researcher, there are two broad types of focus groups: a structured approach which is employed more in market research; and a less rigid and structured approach which has emerged from focus group research in the social sciences. In marketing research, the moderators need to be visible and take an active role in the group. They perform focus groups for the satisfaction of their clients because they are usually employed to seek some specific answers for their clients. Hence, more interaction is likely to occur between the moderators and the participants. Additionally, discussion between the participants will be minimal and they are likely to answer the set questions posed by the moderators (see also Stewart et al. 2009). On the other hand, in the less structured

approach to focus groups which is commonly adopted in social science research, the participants are encouraged to talk to each other instead of answering the moderators' questions. Hence, the moderators primarily aim to facilitate discussion, rather than to direct it. The aim of focus groups in social science research is to understand the participants' meanings and interpretations. Morgan (2002) argues that, depending on the research topic and theoretical approach, both approaches can be adopted within the social sciences. However, in this book, I advocate the less structured focus groups in the social sciences as I base my discussion on the social construction of knowledge and praxis/practices, as readers will see later on in this chapter and throughout the volume. In this chapter, I will focus on the importance of the focus group methodology, its history, and its benefits and limitations.

## THE NATURE OF FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

At the simplest level, a focus group is an informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic (Wilkinson 2004). There are many potential focus group scenarios, for example women who are waiting to see their health care providers in a family planning clinic discussing contraception; adolescent girls sprawled over tables in a classroom to share stories about sexual harassment in schools; and a group of family members gathered around the TV in their living room and discussing their favourite movies (Wilkinson 2004). A focus group, as a research method, 'involved more than one participant per data collection session' (Wilkinson 2004: 271). As such, the focus group methodology is sometimes referred to as a focus group interview, a group interview, or a group depth interview.

Broadly speaking, focus groups are 'collective conversations', which can be small or large (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2008: 375). Focus groups are group discussions which are arranged to examine a specific set of topics (Kitzinger 2005). The group is focused because 'it involves some kind of collective activity' (Kitzinger 2005: 56), for example debating a specific set of social or health issues, reflecting on common perspectives or experiences, or discussing a health or welfare campaign. The primary aim of a focus group is to describe and understand meanings and interpretations of a select group of people to gain an understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of the participants of the group (Liamputtong 2009).

Methodologically, focus group interviews involve a group of 6–8 people who come from similar social and cultural backgrounds or who have similar experiences or concerns. They gather together to discuss a specific issue with the help of a moderator in a particular setting where participants feel comfortable enough to engage in a dynamic discussion for one or two hours. Focus groups do not aim to reach consensus on the discussed issues. Rather, focus groups 'encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behavior, opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues' (Hennink 2007: 6).

A successful focus group discussion relies heavily on 'the development of a permissive, non-threatening environment within the group' where the participants can feel comfortable to discuss their opinions and experiences without fear that they will be judged or ridiculed by others in the group (Hennink 2007: 6). Focus group

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discussions are more akin to natural social interaction among participants. Thus, the environment of focus groups may be more comfortable and enjoyable for the research participants (Jowett & O'Toole 2006; Liamputtong 2009).

A focus group is not simply a means for obtaining accounts of individuals. Rather, it is 'a means to set up a negotiation of meanings through intra- and inter-personal debates' (Cook & Crang 1995: 56). In conceptual terms then, focus groups are situated between individual interviews where only one respondent is involved in a considerably structured setting and participant observation where many participants are involved in a relatively unstructured of 'natural' setting (Conradson 2005).

The focus group method is different from group interviews since group interactions are treated explicitly as 'research data' (Ivanoff & Hultberg 2006: 125). The participants are chosen because they are able to provide valuable contributions to the research questions. The discussion between participants provides the researchers with an opportunity to hear issues which may not emerge from their interaction with the researchers alone. The interaction among the participants themselves leads to more emphasis on the points of view of the participants than those of the researchers (Gaiser 2008).

Focus group interviews allow group dynamics and help the researcher capture shared lived experiences, accessing elements that other methods may not be able to reach. Focus groups permit researchers to uncover aspects of understanding that often remain hidden in the more conventional in-depth interviewing method. Group work is an inviting method for researchers who are working from 'power-sensitive' theoretical perspectives including feminism and postmodernism. The methodology may reduce the imbalance in power relationships between the researcher and participants that grants the researcher the 'authoritative voice', an issue that most feminist and postmodern researchers are concerned about. Instead, focus groups 'create data from multiple voices' (Madriz 2003).

Focus groups put control of the interaction into the hands of the participants rather than the researcher. The interaction between participants themselves substitutes for their exchange with the researcher, and this gives more prominence to the points of view of the respondents. Focus groups provide an opportunity for researchers to listen to local voices. A focus group is a research tool that gives a 'voice' to the research participant by giving him or her an opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand his or her experience. In this way, the focus group methodology allows researchers to pay attention to the needs of those who have little or no societal voice.

The strengths of the focus group methodology are that the researchers are provided with a great opportunity to appreciate the way people see their own reality and hence 'to get closer to the data' (Ivanoff & Hultberg 2006: 126). The methodology allows the intended individuals and groups to be more involved in the research project. As such, it is likely that the research will meet their needs.

A focus group interview has several important features:

- It enables in-depth discussions and involves a relatively small number of people.
- It is focused on a specific area of interest that allows participants to discuss the topic in greater detail.
- Interaction is a unique feature of the focus group interview. Indeed, this characteristic distinguishes the method from the individual in-depth interview. It is based on the

idea that group processes assist people to explore and clarify their points of view. Such processes tend to be less accessible in an individual interview. This group interaction has been termed 'the group effect' by recent writers on focus groups (see Carey & Smith 1994; Barbour 2007; Stewart et al. 2007; Davidson et al. 2010).

- A moderator, who is often also the researcher, introduces the topic and assists the participants to discuss it, encouraging interaction and guiding the conversation. The moderator plays a major role in obtaining good and accurate information from the focus groups. There can be more than one moderator facilitating and moderating in one focus group.
- The participants usually have shared social and cultural experiences (such as age, social class, gender, ethnicity, religion and educational background) or shared particular areas of concern (such as divorce, marriage, motherhood, childbirth, infant feeding, childhood immunisation, diarrhoea, nutrition, mental health, contraception, STDs, or living with HIV/AIDS).

## WHY FOCUS GROUPS?

Focus group methodology is useful in exploring and examining what people think, how they think, and why they think the way they do about the issues of importance to them without pressuring them into making decisions or reaching a consensus. According to Jenny Kitzinger (2005: 57), a well-known focus group researcher, the focus group methodology is an 'ideal' approach for examining the stories, experiences, points of view, beliefs, needs and concerns of individuals. The methodology is especially valuable for permitting the participants to develop their own questions and frameworks as well as to seek their own needs and concerns in their own words and on their own terms. Group work allows the researchers to access different communication forms which people use in their day-to-day interaction, and these include joking, arguing, teasing and recapturing past events. Being able to gain access to diverse forms of communication is valuable since it may not be possible, or can be difficult, to capture the knowledge and attitudes of individuals by asking them to respond to more direct questions as in positivist science such as surveys and questionnaires. The forms of communication that people use in their everyday life 'may tell us *as much*, if not *more*' (Kitzinger 2005: 58) about their knowledge and experience. As such, focus groups permit researchers to enter the world of the participants which other research methods may not be able to do. Focus groups are likely to reveal diverse understandings which often are difficult to access by more orthodox methods of data collection. The methodology also allows the researchers to explore individuals' diverse perspectives since focus groups function within the social network of groups. Crucially then, focus groups discover 'how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed, and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms' (Kitzinger 2005: 58).

As a research method, focus groups are valuable in two main perspectives (Conradson 2005). They offer the researchers a means of obtaining an understanding (insight) of a wide range of views that people have about a specific issue as well as how they interact and discuss the issue. A focus group, for example, could be used to find out how

consumers perceive health care and services, both in terms of their own opinions and in relation to others. For example, how individuals who live in urban areas see health care in comparison with those who live in rural settings (Conradson 2005).

A focus group interview is a useful research tool when the researcher does not have a depth of knowledge about the participants. Focus groups provide rich and detailed information about feelings, thoughts, understandings, perceptions and impressions of people in their own words. The focus group methodology is a flexible research tool because the methodology can be applied to elicit information from any topic, from diverse groups of people and in diverse settings (Stewart et al. 2009).

Focus groups are valuable for obtaining in-depth understandings of the numerous interpretations of a particular issue of the research participants. Focus groups permit researchers to search for the reasons why particular views are held by individuals and groups. The methodology also provides insight into the similarities and differences of understandings held by people. If carried out appropriately, the methodology enables researchers to examine how such understandings differ by social groups, such as social class, age, gender, ethnicity, profession and so on (Conradson 2005). This is the reason why focus groups are particularly suitable for exploring issues 'where complex patterns of behaviour and motivation are evident, where diverse views are held' (Conradson 2005: 131).

As such, focus groups offer possibilities for researchers to explore 'the gap between what people say and what they do' (Conradson 2005: 131). In a Western society, for example, when people are surveyed about their opinions regarding waste recycling, many would suggest that it has significant environmental merits. However, the actual practice of recycling is not always correlated with what they say. People believe that recycling is a good idea, but they actually recycle very little (Conradson 2005). Why is this so? The focus group methodology is a useful approach for exploring this difference. An individual may be reluctant to discuss this contradiction during an in-depth interview where the main dynamic occurs primarily between researcher and the participant. But in a focus group setting, where the interactions occur between the participants themselves rather than with the researcher, the participants are likely to be more open about the divergence and the reason why this might be. The focus group setting also provides the researcher with opportunities to follow up the comments and to cross-check with the participants in a more interactive manner than a questionnaire or individual interview can offer.

Focus groups allow multiple lines of communication. For people who find one-on-one and face-to-face interaction 'intimidating' or 'scary', the group interview may offer them 'a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people from the same socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds' (Madriz 2003: 364). Focus groups are ideal for many people from ethnic minority groups. For instance, in their study on the views of health services with Negev Bedouin Arabs, Jeffrey Borkan and others (2000: 209) suggest that focus groups offer 'an enjoyable forum for interaction' among respondents and permit some data quality control because 'extreme views are often muted or marginalized by the majority'. They also offer the respondents the possibility for connecting with others and the continuous establishment of opinions during the group sessions. See Chapter 8 in this volume.



Focus groups have been used to 'give a voice' to marginalised groups such as ethnic minority groups, poor women and men, or people affected by stigmatised illnesses such as HIV/AIDS. They enable researchers, policy-makers and others to 'listen' to people who may have little chance otherwise to express their viewpoints about their health and other needs (Madriz 1998; 2003; Liamputtong 2007; 2010a). In early HIV/AIDS research, Joseph and others (1984) employed focus groups as a means of understanding gay and bisexual men who were perceived as at risk, yet whose health behaviour and needs were not well understood by researchers or the public. The voice of marginalised groups is essential in participatory action research where the participants play an active role in the research process (Liamputtong 2007; 2009; 2010a). Thus, focus groups are used extensively in this type of qualitative research as a basis for empowering marginalised people (see Chapter 7 in this volume).

Focus group methodology is adopted widely in the field of development in a cross-cultural context, especially in eliciting community viewpoints and understanding community dynamics (Lloyd-Evans 2006). Recently, there has been a move towards more participatory research approaches which seek to 'redress issues of unequal power, positionality and Eurocentricity', which may happen when field research is undertaken in non-Western contexts (Lloyd-Evans 2006: 153; see Peek & Fothergill 2009; Liamputtong 2010a). The focus group methodology has become 'one of the main processes for engendering public participation and facilitating the use of non-verbal techniques'. Focus groups provide a more rapid and fruitful way for working with communities than other methods such as in-depth interviewing or ethnographic methods can (Lloyd-Evans 2006: 153–154). See Chapter 8 in this volume.

One of the great advantages of the focus group methodology is its ability to cultivate people's responses to events as they evolve (Barbour 2007). In some situations, research can be carried out quickly. For example, Elizabeth Black and Philip Smith (1999) undertook their focus group research in a timely manner following the death of Princess Diana. They observed that women comprised 80 per cent of the signatories in books of condolence. Hence, three separate focus groups were held with Australian women of different age groups and social backgrounds and were conducted within three weeks of her death and funeral. Black and Smith (1999: 263) argued that: 'The death of Princess Diana set in train a series of official and popular responses ... Mass media accounts of Princess Diana's purportedly extraordinary appeal are speculative, lack methodological foundation, and fail to give adequate consideration to potential variability in responses to her life and death.' Focus groups were seen as an appropriate method which would enable Black and Smith to timely explore popular understandings of Diana.

Similarly, Lori Peek and Alice Fothergill (2009: 34) carried out a longitudinal study of children's experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. About a month after Katrina had devastated the US Gulf Coast, in October 2005, they travelled to Louisiana to explore how the disaster had affected the lives, relationships and schooling of children, how children themselves were doing in order to assist their own recovery, and what attempts were being made by adults to help the children cope. In this study, they undertook seven focus groups as part of the larger project. One focus group had a group of young children, with ages ranging from three to nine years. Three were carried out with adolescents who were enrolled in middle school. One was organised with four mothers who had been evacuated to a Baptist church shelter in Baton